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ABSTRACT

A University of Wyoming program designed to help faculty work on writing skills with students, primarily graduate students, for whom English is a second language (ESL) is described. The workshop was developed in response to increasing requests for writing center help with ESL graduate students. The report describes several different early approaches and the workshop that grew out of those experiences, which was intended to: (1) promote exchange of ideas among faculty; (2) help content-area faculty understand the rhetorical and cultural differences between first and second language writing, and their implications for teaching and supervision of research; (3) provide useful background materials on ESL writing and suggestions for working effectively and efficiently with ESL writers; and (4) suggest how faculty might use the writing center's individualized or small-group conferencing to assist them. One highlight of the workshop was a panel of five foreign students who spoke about the most difficult issues facing them as second-language writers. Ten suggestions for making the classroom more accessible to ESL writers, 5 ways to help students use the writing center, and 5 ways to help thesis and dissertation writers use the writing center are then offered. (MSE)

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Helping Faculty Work with International Writers Across the Disciplines

Carolyn Young, Judith Powers

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Presentation for TESOL '95, Long Beach, California
45 minutes, paper

HELPING FACULTY WORK WITH INTERNATIONAL WRITERS
ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

I'm Carolyn Young of the University of Wyoming. I teach native speaking and ESL Composition in the Department of English. I am also a member of our University's Writing Center, where one focus of my professional development has been working with ESL writers both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. My colleague and collaborator, Judy Powers, was supposed to copresent with me today, but a few months after we had submitted our proposal to TESOL last spring, Judy accepted a position as program assistant for the Wyoming Council for the Humanities. Her inspiration and energy have been a driving force behind the innovations in our Writing Center's work with ESL writers, and she will continue to be actively involved with our writing and her research. In the meantime, without her, today I'm going to tell you about an exciting workshop that we did last spring, a workshop in which we were successful, I think, in. . .

Helping Faculty Work with International Writers Across the Disciplines

OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY: title, parts of presentation

I'm dividing the time today into four parts to talk about the background for the workshop, to give an overview of the workshop itself, to show you a 20-minute video of our student panel, and to end with discussing the rewards and lessons of the workshop.

I. The background for the workshop: why we did it.

Around 1991, the University of Wyoming Writing Center began to experience substantial increases in requests for ESL conferencing, especially with graduate ESL writers. These increases were part of broader increases in conferences with writers across the disciplines and graduate research writers in general. At the outset, they presented some problems. ESL conferencing in general was problematic for us because at that time, we had few staff members trained in the special problems of second-language writing. Graduate ESL writers were doubly problematic since they often came in late in the writing process and needed help with long, technically involved theses and dissertations.

Our conferencing staff quickly realized that we needed to respond to the frustrations these problems often created for both conferencer and writer. Our response took three primary directions: (1) gathering information, (2) devising new conferencing strategies, and (3) working collaboratively with faculty across our campus.

1. The first direction focused on acquiring information about

graduate writing and graduate ESL writing, although the results had definite implications for undergraduate ESL writers as well. Our assistant director at the time, Judy Powers, developed and administered a three-part survey; the first part asked Writing Centers at graduate institutions nationwide about their work with graduate and graduate ESL writers. Parts two and three of the survey asked thesis/dissertation advisors at the University of Wyoming and recent UW graduates about their experiences advising and/or writing theses and dissertations. We found a lot of frustration on all sides.

2. The second direction led us to develop new conferencing strategies to work with ESL clients. Because our Writing Center was, and still is, staffed with lecturers in the English department, we were lucky to have several members who taught both ESL classes and native speaking writing courses. This overlap of expertise helped us to rethink first language conferencing strategies and adjust them for second language writers.

   In addition, though, we designed a new conferencing method for work with graduate thesis and dissertation writers that we call the trialogue, a method which essentially brings the student's thesis director into the conferencing process.

3. Our third direction led us to develop collaborative relationships with faculty in the disciplines. In spring 1994, a Curriculum Innovation grant from our Center for Teaching Excellence allowed us to work with faculty on the design of three new upper-level writing courses in the disciplines. One of these was a graduate research writing course in Computer Science; because nearly half of the students taking the course would be second-language writers, discovering solutions to working with second language research writers in this context was a focal point of the design process.

Our workshop, then--offered for the first time last spring--grew out of what we learned from all of the above experiences. We became aware of the need to communicate with faculty in the disciplines on a broader level than we had been able to do so far--to share with them what we had learned that might help them (1) work more effectively and efficiently with ESL writers in classrooms across the campus and curriculum and (2) to inform them of how the writing center might help them in this endeavor. The workshop was partially funded by an innovative teaching grant from our Center for Teaching Excellence.

OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY: Goals of the workshop

This overhead reflects the goals we set for the workshop and the

ones we used in the information we sent to department heads and to the faculty.

- ♦to promote the exchange of ideas about working with ESL writers among faculty in the disciplines
- ♦to help content-area faculty understand the rhetorical and cultural differences between first and second language writing and the implications of those differences for their classroom teaching and their supervision of research writing
- ♦to provide useful background materials on ESL writing and suggestions for working effectively and efficiently with ESL writers in the classroom
- ♦to suggest how faculty might use the Writing Center's one-on-one conferencing or small-group tutorial programs to assist them in their work with ESL writers

II. An overview of the workshop itself: what we did, how we did it.

Our first step in organizing the workshop was to gather information on the distribution of ESL students across campus, both in terms of where the largest populations were located and which colleges and departments currently used the Writing Center most frequently. (College of Engineering was high in numbers; Arts and Sciences was high in graduate ESL use of the Writing Center.) Armed with some knowledge of ESL populations and distributions, I then introduced the idea of our workshop at the Department Heads' meetings of each college, trying to convey a clear sense of the importance of our goals to the success of their teaching and research programs.

After some deliberation, we set the workshop date for the afternoon of April 6, 1994 (1:00 to 4:30 p.m) and sent out information brochures to faculty in every department with any ESL undergraduate and graduate students--we also posted information. We asked for a response from interested faculty, indicating that there would be a limit of 15 spaces in the workshop.

By workshop time, we had 12 faculty members enrolled. As the workshop date neared, we contacted all respondents, asking them to suggest specific topics of concern regarding international writers. We arranged for a comfortable setting, the History Lounge, which had a large table to sit around. We arranged refreshments: coffee and juice, bakery cookies. We had three video cameras and one central microphone to record the workshop. We had packets and pencils prepared and ready on the table.

OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY: the outline (tentative agenda) of workshop

The outline of the workshop looked like this:

1. We began by explaining why we had planned the workshop

•We were trying to give faculty a clear sense that we understood their difficulties in working with second-language writers in first-language contexts.
Two important considerations were to help them see that,--that if they found work with second-language writing time-consuming and sometimes frustrating, there were reasons for those feelings and--that a better understanding of those reasons and of possible solutions to them would help them as well as their students.

•Also, we wanted to underscore what our workshop would not include, political discussion. We wanted to clarify that we were separating the discussion of writing problems from other kinds of questions about international students that might arise.

•We gave each participant a packet of materials and described briefly what was in the packet of materials that they could look over and make use of at their leisure. Included, in addition to all the overhead transparencies for the workshop itself, were data on international students on campus, data on Writing Center use by students from different department and colleges, handouts on the Writing Center and on the ESL support program on campus, a few articles on ESL writing in contexts appropriate to the workshop participants, a focused (one page) bibliography.

2. Then, we asked participants to introduce themselves and explain in what context they were working with ESL writers, and what they considered the hardest problems they had to deal with. We had representatives from 4 major colleges at the University, Engineering, Agriculture, Business, and Arts & Sciences.

The participants mentioned a variety of problem areas. Some of them, teachers of communication and technical writing, were concerned about how to help ESL writers understand classroom communication more fully. They worried that students weren't understanding, weren't able to collaborate with native speaking students. Other participants in Colleges of Business and Engineering who taught both undergraduates and graduates were concerned about how to teach critical thinking skills. They noticed that international students can be accomplished data gatherers, obtain high test scores, and memorize accurately, but are less accomplished problem solvers in less structured situations, and lack skill and confidence when it comes to writing in academic formats or for academic journals. Participants who had advised international graduate writers expressed frustration at not knowing how to help their graduate students write theses and acknowledged that international writers seem particularly shy or reluctant to "really try." All participants were concerned about wanting

to be able to help international writers with grammar and style, but didn't know how to do so without getting "burned out" themselves or doing the work for their students.

3. The highlight of the workshop was our student panel--five international students who talked to the faculty about what they perceived as the most difficult issues facing them as second language writers. We had originally asked them to tell faculty what it is like to write in a second or third language--what is difficult about it. Each panelist spoke for about 3 to 4 minutes and then the group responded to each others' comments. Eventually, the workshop participants joined in the discussion as well. The panelists outlined a wide range of problems from classroom comprehension to rhetorical styles and formats. I'm going to show you a portion of this panel, and you'll hear students talk about the differences they perceive between writing/researching in their own language and in English.

4. During the break for refreshments, we encouraged our panel to stay and talk to faculty informally.

   The second half of the workshop, then, presented a brief technical background for some of the points the student panel made and some solutions for faculty and students. I began by breaking the difficulties ESL writers often face down into three categories, cultural, rhetorical, linguistic differences, and then tried to show how these differences result in the problems the first part of the workshop had defined.

5. Judy then closed the workshop with some creative problem solving giving the faculty some recommendations for creating classroom techniques and for using the Writing Center. I'll be closing this presentation by showing you the lists of suggestions we came up with. They are also included in the packet of handouts you have received.

III. The highlight of the workshop: the international student panel--20-minute video

I'm going to show you a portion of the student panel--the sound isn't as sharp as we had hoped, unfortunately, but the tape is worth looking at because the panel was such a pivotal part of what we did. The students were articulate and reflective about the problems they encountered when writing in a second language. Putting faces to the problems was absolutely essential to the success of the whole workshop.

SHOW VIDEOTAPE (20 minutes)

In this panel, you heard--especially if you had been there and heard it in its entirety--all the problems the faculty initially brought up--and more. Here, of course, the problems were addressed from the other side, problems understanding concepts like paraphrasing, academic formats like the research paper, and English grammar especially idiomatic expressions.

The student panel made a lasting impression on our participants. Many were fascinated to hear how much these students understood about the rhetorical and linguistic intricacies of English, yet how difficult they considered writing in English to be because of the expectations of the academic audience. The faculty's fear that students weren't comprehending difficult assignments was substantiated when they heard our panel talk about how hard it is to understand when faculty talk too fast, how long it takes to read and comprehend written texts, how uncustomary it is to speak out and volunteer in class, how unthinkable it is to ask a professor questions in class. The groundwork was laid for us to suggest some classroom management and course preparation strategies. When the panel talked about not knowing when to expand ideas or what vocabulary to use, we could suggest methods of giving students feedback on their writing and the appropriate times to get students to the Writing Center. When the students talked about the difficulty understanding research formats and research skills, we could talk about the value of giving models and offering research writing courses.

OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCY: Judy's 10 relatively easy ways. . .

The student panel and our discussion of cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences led to the final part of our workshop where we could offer various suggestions to ease the difficulties that we'd established as two-sided by this time (teacher and student).

A three-part solutions section began with Judy's 10 Relatively Easy ways. . . Each category of suggestions attempted to respond to the student/faculty comments we heard previous to and during the workshop and to our technical explanation of "why" these comments were accurate in some sense. Here, though, we tried to make specific suggestions, showing why they might be good strategies, based on specific examples drawn from our own experience.

Ten Easy Suggestions for Making Classrooms
Accessible to International Writers

Developing Course Materials

1. Provide written assignments.
2. Avoid highly idiomatic language, colloquial language, and slang in written assignments.
3. Provide models and/or guidelines for structure.

Conducting Classes

4. Be aware of the difficulties international students may have in comprehending material presented orally.
5. Be sure students understand that it is all right to ask questions.

Working One-on-one with Writing

6. Help ESL writers catch problems in drafts early.
7. Be sure international students understand how to locate and use sources in their research fields properly.
8. Ask ESL writers to talk about what they are writing.

Evaluating and Commenting on Drafts

9. Be as explicit as possible in commenting on drafts.
10. Develop a policy you can "live with" for handling sentence-level errors in ESL writing.

Faculty were particularly interested in suggestions on how to give their students feedback on their writing and to help them with grammar. This interest led to our second and third part solutions: the Writing Center's role in working with both first and second language writers at the undergraduate and graduate levels.

OVERHEAD TRANSPARENCIES: 5 easy ways to help students use Writing Center; 5 easy ways to help thesis/dissertation students use the Writing Center.

Five Easy Ways to Help Students Use the Writing Center

1. Provide written assignments
2. Refer students to the Writing Center early in the writing process.
3. Prioritize revision tasks for students.
4. Understand how the Writing Center works--avoid saying we will "correct," "check," or "edit."
5. Help us understand your expectations--talk to us, if necessary.

Five Easy Ways to Help Thesis and Dissertation Writers Use the Writing Center

1. Refer students to the Writing Center early in the writing process.
2. Prioritize revision tasks for students.
3. Provide models, when necessary.
4. Understand how the Writing Center works--avoid saying we will "correct" or "edit" drafts.
5. Help us understand your expectations.

IV. The rewards of the workshop: what we learned

We learned that the participants were grateful for our information, for understanding how delicate a situation it is to work with

writing in a discipline especially if the writer is a second language writer, for realizing that they don't have to "burn out" trying to help international writers.

We learned that faculty breathe a sigh of relief when they realize they don't have to assume the responsibility for editing their international students' work and when they realize how the Writing Center can help them by teaching their students revision strategies.

We learned that we could pull together manageable and realistic suggestions for addressing most of the problems that both faculty and students perceived, suggestions that would help all student writers, undergraduate and graduate, not just second language writers so that the faculty would not have to undermine the education of their first language writers in any way.

We learned that most faculty respect good writing and the process and effort that goes into producing it; they are eager to pass on what they know to their students if they can do so time efficiently, that is, if they can anticipate problems and allow time to solve them. Some problems are common to all students; some unique to second language writers. They seemed to come away from our workshop with an awareness of the latter. Many expressed enthusiasm and acknowledged the need for starting a graduate level research writing course modelled after the one designed by the Computer Science department.

One of the most heartening things was the response during the final discussion period by one of our participants, the head of the Civil Engineering Department, who held up the draft of a ESL graduate dissertation that he had just finished commenting on and began reading us phrases that he had offered as suggestions but now knew they would mean little or nothing to the second language writer for whom they were intended. At that point, we knew that he had taken something away from the afternoon's discussion.

Finally, another reward was to receive positive responses from our participants that the workshop was worthwhile. A physics professor, who advises many international graduates, himself a non-native speaker of English, opened his letter with praises and thanks.

The goals of our workshop echo a recurrent theme I've heard throughout this conference--one of making the academy more accessible to ESL students. The success of our workshop shows the importance of our writing center's work in bridging the gap between ESL writers struggling with the language and the discourse and expectations of their different disciplines.